MAGA, Putin, and the Seduction of the Past: A Philosophical Essay on The Great Gatsby

by Daniel Shilansky

The American Promise and Its Philosophical Inheritance

To read *The Great Gatsby* as a novel about wealth, or about love, or even about the peculiar glamour of the nineteen-twenties, is to read it truly but not deeply enough. Beneath its surface of champagne and green lights and shirts thrown in cascading piles, the novel is engaged in a serious argument — one that had been building in American and European thought for the better part of a century before Fitzgerald set it down. That argument concerns the nature of the self: what a person is, whether a person can be remade, and what it costs, morally and spiritually, to attempt such a remaking. These were not merely academic questions in 1925. They were the questions that the modern world had made urgent, and they arrived in Fitzgerald's novel already charged with a long history of competing answers.

The philosophical tradition most immediately relevant here is the one that had grown up around the idea of the will — the human capacity to choose, to strive, and to transform oneself through sustained effort. This tradition had deep roots in Protestant theology, where the soul's relationship to God was understood partly as a matter of individual striving and self-examination. But by the nineteenth century, the theological scaffolding had largely been removed, and what remained was a secular faith in self-creation: the belief that a person is not simply born into a fixed station or a fixed character, but is, in some fundamental sense, the author of his own life. In America, this belief had acquired the force of national mythology. It was embedded in the stories the culture told about itself — stories of men who had arrived with nothing and made themselves into something, stories in which the distance between origin and destination was not a scandal but a proof of virtue.

The philosopher who gave this tradition its most rigorous and influential American expression was Ralph Waldo Emerson, writing in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Emerson argued that the individual soul contained within itself a spark of something universal and divine, and that the highest human task was to trust that inner spark absolutely — to resist the deadening pressure of custom, convention, and inherited opinion, and to live instead from one's own deepest nature. His philosophy placed extraordinary weight on the individual's capacity for self-determination, and it licensed a kind of heroic confidence in one's own vision of what one might become. When Emerson wrote that a man should trust himself, he meant something almost metaphysical: that the self, in its deepest reaches, was trustworthy precisely because it participated in something larger than mere personal desire.

This Emersonian inheritance flowed directly into the culture that produced Fitzgerald, and Jay Gatsby is unintelligible without it. Gatsby is, among other things, a figure who has taken the Emersonian promise with absolute literalness. He has looked at the self he was given — the son of shiftless farm people from North Dakota, a young man named James Gatz — and he has refused it. He has invented another self in its place, complete with a fabricated history, an assumed name, and a manner so carefully constructed that it has become, in some sense, more real than the original. The famous image of the young Gatz writing his self-improvement schedule in the back of a copy of *Hopalong Cassidy* — rising early, studying electricity, practicing elocution, being resolute — is Fitzgerald's deliberate invocation of the self-made man tradition, rendered with a tenderness that is inseparable from its irony.

The Schedule as Sacred Document: Weber, the Calling, and the Hollow Form

The Emersonian tradition had stripped Protestant theology of its Calvinist machinery. The text that restores that machinery — and makes Gatsby's *Hopalong Cassidy* schedule philosophically legible in a way that Emerson alone cannot — is Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), whose absence from the critical apparatus through which Fitzgerald is usually read has allowed a crucial distinction to go missing. Weber's argument, in its essential structure, is this: Benjamin Franklin's famous self-improvement regimen — the daily schedule, the thirteen virtues, the relentless rational accounting of time and conduct — was not simply the pragmatic wisdom of a shrewd entrepreneur. It was the secular residue of a specifically Calvinist theological structure: the idea that sustained, disciplined activity in one's vocation (*Beruf* — a word that carries both the sense of ordinary profession and religious calling, the secular and the sacred fused in a single term) was a sign of divine election, a proof, legible through worldly outcomes, that one belonged among the saved. Calvin had argued that God's election was absolute and inscrutable; no act of will or piety could change it. The consequence, psychologically devastating in its logic, was that the only evidence available to the believer was the quality of his conduct in the world — not as a means of earning salvation, but as a sign that salvation had already been granted. Rational asceticism, the disciplined ordering of daily life in the service of one's calling, became the form that anxiety about election took when it needed to express itself in action.

What Weber traced, and what matters for understanding Fitzgerald, is the fate of this structure once its theological foundation had been removed. By the nineteenth century, the Calvinist framework had largely dissolved, but the behavioral pattern it had produced — the schedule, the self-examination, the relentless orientation of daily life toward a future goal — survived, detached from its original justification. What remained was the form of calling without the content: disciplined striving in the service of worldly success, with no transcendent purpose to give the striving its final meaning. Weber called the result the "iron cage" — the machinery of rational accumulation that continued to organize human life after the spirit that had animated it had evaporated. The schedule survived; the God who had made the schedule meaningful did not.

The young James Gatz writing his self-improvement schedule in the back of *Hopalong Cassidy* is a perfect Weberian document. The items — study electricity and needed inventions, practise elocution, read one improving book or magazine per week, be better to parents — have the form of Franklinian self-cultivation without the substance. They are not organized around a calling in Weber's sense, because a calling requires an inner conviction of purpose that no schedule can supply and that Gatsby does not have. His purpose is entirely external: Daisy, the green light, the life across the water. The schedule is an instrument aimed at an object, and this is exactly what distinguishes it from the Weberian model it mimics. Franklin's schedule was, on Weber's reading, oriented toward something larger than personal desire — toward a form of conduct that signified participation in a divine order. Gatsby's schedule is oriented toward recovering a woman he met five years ago. The outward form is identical; the inner structure is the opposite.

This distinction locates the failure of Gatsby's self-creation more sharply than the Emersonian critique alone can manage. Emerson demands that the authentic self be independent of external determination; Gatsby fails this test because his entire construction is oriented toward Daisy. The Weberian critique is harder to deflect, because it identifies not a moral failure but a structural one. The calling, properly understood, generates its own inner discipline — a discipline that survives the absence of its object, that can sustain the self when the external goal fails or changes. What Gatsby has is not discipline but fixation, and fixation is the condition of a will that has made itself a means to an end it cannot control. When the end proves unattainable, the will has nowhere to go. The iron cage without the spirit is Weber's name for the condition of modern life; Gatsby's schedule without the calling is its literary embodiment.

Trimalchio in West Egg: The Classical Precedent Fitzgerald Named

Fitzgerald's working title for the novel was *Trimalchio in West Egg*, and the name he chose — and then abandoned — is a precise index of what he understood himself to be doing. Trimalchio is the protagonist of the *Cena Trimalchionis*, the banquet section of Petronius's first-century *Satyricon*: a former slave who has become enormously wealthy, who throws lavish dinner parties for guests he barely knows and who do not much care about him, who has had his tomb built while still alive and who stages his own funeral — weeping slaves, dirge music, himself laid out in state — at the dinner's end, for the entertainment of people who find the gesture grotesque. The parties are extravagant; the host is not accepted. The Satyricon renders this with a comic cruelty that the novel's educated audience recognized immediately. When Fitzgerald describes Gatsby's parties — the hundreds of people who come and go without knowing their host, the elaborate machinery of hospitality aimed at a single woman across the water — he is invoking a literary precedent that strips the pathos from the spectacle and shows what, without it, the spectacle is. Gatsby refers to himself as Trimalchio exactly once in the novel: "It was when curiosity about Gatsby was at its highest that the lights in his house failed to go on one Saturday night — and, as obscurely as it had begun, his career as Trimalchio was over."

What Trimalchio establishes — and what neither Weber nor Emerson nor Nietzsche can establish — is that performed wealth's failure to purchase social legitimacy is not a peculiarly American pathology, not a consequence of Calvinist secularization or the distortions of the frontier myth. It is a structural feature of social hierarchies that distinguish between money and standing, between what can be bought and what must be inherited or earned through membership in a community that precedes the purchase. Trimalchio is a freed slave with enormous wealth; Gatsby is a bootlegger's son with enormous wealth; the gap between them and the social world they are trying to enter is in both cases not financial but ontological. The existing community holds something that money cannot reach: the authority to confer recognition, and the willingness to withhold it. No party is lavish enough to close this gap, because the gap is not about parties. Petronius understood this with the clarity of a satirist who had attended such dinners and watched the guests exchange contemptuous glances over the rim of their cups. The MacKendrick study of 1950, in the *Classical Journal*, traced the parallel in detail; Fitzgerald's novel is the American restatement of a problem that Latin literature had already diagnosed as inherent to the structure of aspiration under social hierarchy.

What Fitzgerald adds that Petronius does not provide — and what gives the American version its specific character — is the backward orientation of the desire. Trimalchio wants to be accepted *now*: to be recognized in his present wealth, his present house, his present performance of magnificence. Gatsby does not want this, or not primarily. He wants to return. The parties are not aimed at general social acceptance but at recovering a specific afternoon in Louisville five years before, at reversing a particular outcome in a particular drawing room. Trimalchio's tragedy is the tragedy of social exclusion; Gatsby's tragedy is the tragedy of temporal impossibility. The classical framework Fitzgerald named provides the social skeleton of the novel's argument — the performed wealth that cannot buy what it is after — but the temporal structure, the absolute orientation of desire toward the past, is the addition that makes the novel not a modernization of Petronius but a diagnosis of something Petronius's world had not yet made possible: the romantic idealization of a specific lost moment, the transformation of the social aspiration into a temporal one. Jay Gatsby is Trimalchio haunted by a green light that Trimalchio would not have understood, because the green light is not a prize to be won but a past to be recovered — and the impossibility is therefore not social but constitutive.

The Counter-Tradition: Fate, Character, and the Weight of the Given

The Emersonian tradition did not go unchallenged, and the challenge it faced by the early twentieth century was formidable. From several directions at once, thinkers had begun to argue that the self was not the free, self-determining entity that the optimistic tradition supposed. The self, these critics maintained, was shaped by forces it did not choose and could not fully escape: by heredity, by social circumstance, by the accumulated weight of the past.

The most scientifically influential version of this challenge came from the tradition of naturalist thought that had grown up in the wake of Charles Darwin's work on biological inheritance and the struggle for survival. Darwin himself had been cautious about applying his ideas to human social life, but others were less restrained. By the late nineteenth century, a broad current of thought — sometimes called naturalism, in both its scientific and its literary forms — had established the view that human beings were creatures of their environment and their biological inheritance to a degree that left little room for the kind of heroic self-creation Emerson had celebrated. The naturalist novelists — Theodore Dreiser in America, Émile Zola in France — had made this vision the basis of a new kind of fiction, in which characters were shown to be driven by forces they barely understood and could not master. Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, published in 1900, had scandalized readers partly because it depicted a young woman who rose in the world not through virtue and self-discipline but through a combination of luck, desire, and the blind workings of social machinery.

The naturalist challenge was primarily scientific and literary — a claim about how biological and social forces shape human behaviour from the outside. Running alongside it, and cutting deeper, was a philosophical challenge that worked from the inside: a diagnosis not of external determination but of the will's own inner structure. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, whose work had been widely read and discussed throughout the nineteenth century, had argued that beneath the surface of human striving lay a blind, irrational force he called the Will — not the individual's conscious will to improve himself, but a vast, impersonal drive that used human beings as its instruments without caring in the least for their happiness or their aspirations. Where Emerson had seen the individual will as something noble and potentially divine, Schopenhauer saw the will as a trap: the more intensely a person desired, the more completely he was enslaved to a force that could never be satisfied. This dark vision had a long afterlife in European thought. By the early twentieth century, it had been absorbed and transformed by Friedrich Nietzsche, who accepted Schopenhauer's diagnosis of the will's power but refused his pessimistic conclusion, arguing instead that the truly great individual could affirm his will creatively and impose his own values on a world that had no values of its own. Nietzsche's influence on the intellectual atmosphere of the nineteen-teens and twenties was enormous, even among people who had never read him directly; his ideas had filtered into the general culture as a kind of permission for the exceptional individual to stand apart from conventional morality and live by his own law.

Fitzgerald was not a systematic philosopher, and *The Great Gatsby* is not a philosophical treatise. But Fitzgerald was a serious and widely read man, acutely sensitive to the intellectual currents of his time. The novel he wrote in 1925 is located at the intersection of these competing traditions — the Emersonian faith in self-creation, the naturalist insistence on the determining power of circumstance and origin, and the Nietzschean celebration of the exceptional individual who wills his own reality into being. Gatsby partakes of all three, and the novel's power comes partly from the way it refuses to let any single tradition win.

The Moment of Crisis: Modernity and the Unstable Self

What made this old argument newly urgent in the nineteen-twenties was a set of social and cultural transformations that had accelerated dramatically in the years following the Great War. The war had shattered many of the inherited frameworks through which people had understood their place in the world — frameworks of nation, of class, of religious faith, of moral certainty. What remained, for many educated Americans and Europeans, was a sense of exposure: the feeling that the self was no longer anchored in anything stable, that identity was something one constructed rather than something one received.

This feeling had been given philosophical expression in various ways. William James, the American philosopher and psychologist who had died in 1910 but whose influence was still very much alive in the nineteen-twenties, had argued that the self was not a fixed substance but a stream of experience, a continuous flow of thoughts and feelings that had no permanent core. James's pragmatism — the view that ideas are tools for navigating experience rather than mirrors of eternal truth — had the effect of making identity itself seem provisional and revisable. If truth was what worked, then perhaps the self was also what worked: a construction, a hypothesis, subject to revision in the light of new circumstances.

The social world of the nineteen-twenties seemed to confirm this unsettling possibility. The rapid growth of cities, the explosion of consumer culture, the new possibilities for social mobility opened up by industrial wealth — all of these made it easier than ever before to shed one's origins and assume a new identity. Department stores, fashion magazines, and the nascent advertising industry were in the business of selling people new versions of themselves. The movies offered a gallery of glamorous identities available for imaginative adoption. In this environment, the question of what a self really was — whether it had a genuine core or was simply a performance, a costume, a story one told — had become not merely philosophical but intensely practical.

The Great Gatsby arrives into this moment of cultural and philosophical instability. The novel does not simply illustrate the debate; it enacts it, through the formal choices Fitzgerald makes about how to tell the story, who tells it, and what that teller can and cannot know.

The Waste Land Answered: Fitzgerald, Eliot, and the Competing Diagnoses

Three years before *The Great Gatsby* was published, T.S. Eliot had published *The Waste Land* (1922), and the relationship between the two works is not one of influence in the ordinary sense but of argument — of one diagnosis of the modern condition answered by another. Fitzgerald studied *The Waste Land* while writing Gatsby; he sent Eliot a copy of the finished novel; Eliot wrote back that it had "interested and excited me more than any new novel I have seen, either English or American, for a number of years," and told Ezra Pound that Gatsby was "the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James." That the two writers recognized in each other a shared project — the attempt to render the specific quality of cultural exhaustion that the postwar years had produced — is not incidental. It is the frame within which Fitzgerald's novel makes its sharpest claim about its own historical moment.

Eliot's diagnosis, in *The Waste Land*, is of a civilization that has lost access to its own sacred resources. The poem moves through a series of failed rituals — failed love, failed prophecy, failed community — in a landscape of cultural debris: fragments of tradition, snatches of song, voices that cannot connect. The central image is of a world from which water — the possibility of regeneration, of real transformation — has been withdrawn. The Fisher King sits paralysed at the river's edge; the grail is somewhere but cannot be found; the ritual that would restore the waste land to fertility cannot be performed because the knowledge of how to perform it has been lost. Eliot's solution, gestured toward in the poem's final section, is a return to tradition — to Sanskrit, to the Upanishads, to the fragments of Western religious culture that survive in memory — as the only repository of the sacred resources that the modern world needs but cannot generate from within itself.

Fitzgerald's novel is situated at exactly the same diagnosis but refuses Eliot's exit. The Valley of Ashes that lies between West Egg and New York is Fitzgerald's waste land, and it is more precisely located than Eliot's: it is the industrial residue of the leisure class, the grey consequence of the parties and the shirts and the yellow cars. Every journey between the world of the novel and the city passes through it. Presiding over it, not as God but as the trace of God, are the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg — a faded oculist's advertisement, enormous blue eyes behind spectacles, staring without sight over the desolation below. Where Eliot's waste land is haunted by fragments of actual sacred tradition — by the Fisher King, by the thunder's commands — Fitzgerald's is haunted by the residue of commerce: a faded advertisement for a business that no longer exists. This is a sharper diagnosis than Eliot's, and a more specifically American one. Eliot mourns the loss of tradition; Fitzgerald shows that in America, tradition was never fully present — what filled its place was advertising, the systematic manufacture of desire, and it has not been lost so much as allowed to fade.

One further point of divergence that the comparison makes legible: *The Waste Land* ends with the imperative *Shantih shantih shantih* — a Sanskrit benediction, a suggestion that the resources for

renewal exist outside the Western tradition if not within it. *The Great Gatsby* ends with Nick's image of the boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past — an image of the impossibility of forward movement in a world that has no genuine future to offer. Where Eliot, at the edge of the waste land, looks toward tradition for rescue, Fitzgerald looks toward narrative — the retrospective making of meaning from wreckage — and finds in it not a solution but an activity: the only thing left to do when the green light has gone out and the advertisement has faded.

The Faded Advertisement: Eckleburg's Eyes and the Absent Transcendent

"The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic — their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose." The eyes belong to a faded oculist's billboard in the Valley of Ashes, painted by some forgotten commercial artist to advertise a practice in Queens that may no longer exist. They do not see. They are painted. But they preside over the valley with something that, in a less disenchanted world, would be the authority of a divine gaze — omnidirectional, impersonal, fixed. George Wilson, in the derangement of grief after Myrtle's death, stands before his garage and says: "God sees everything." He is looking at the billboard.

This image encodes the specific theological vacancy of Fitzgerald's world — more precisely than either the Emersonian or the Nietzschean framework, because it does not require that the transcendent ever existed in order to be mourned. Emerson had argued that the authentic self participated in something larger than personal desire — that the individual will, at its deepest, was continuous with the moral order of the universe. Nietzsche had argued that God was dead but that this absence was an opportunity for the creative will to impose its own meaning on a meaningless world. Both positions required a specific relationship to transcendence — either its presence, as in Emerson, or its productive absence, as in Nietzsche. What Eckleburg represents is neither. He is not God grown indifferent; he is advertising become God, and then advertising become faded and irrelevant, the commercial image outlasting even its commercial function. The transcendent gaze, in the world Fitzgerald depicts, was always already a manufactured image, and the question is not how to recover it or replace it but how to live in a world where it was never what it appeared to be.

George Wilson's confusion of Eckleburg with God is the novel's most compressed instance of philosophical argument. Wilson is not insane; he is making the only theological inference available to him in the world he inhabits — that the largest, most persistent, most apparently authoritative gaze in his visual field must be, in some sense, the watching of God. That this gaze turns out to belong to a defunct oculist's practice does not, in the world of the novel, clearly distinguish it from what divine oversight would look like if divine oversight existed. Fitzgerald's 1925 is diagnosing not the dramatic death of God that Nietzsche announced, but the quiet replacement of transcendence by commerce, and the subsequent fading of commerce into something that is neither

transcendent nor useful nor even present, just staring.

Gatsby's green light belongs to this same theological economy. Not quite a sacred object, it functions like one — a point of orientation that gives the landscape its meaning, an object of what amounts to devotional attention. The green light and Eckleburg's eyes are the two poles of the novel's absent transcendent: one the object of private quasi-religious aspiration, the other the public remnant of a commercial surrogate for divinity. That both fail — the green light because it was never what Gatsby thought it was, Eckleburg's eyes because George Wilson acts on a theological insight grounded in a billboard — is the novel's argument that the conditions required for either Emersonian idealism or Nietzschean vitalism have been irreversibly compromised. You cannot trust the self in Emerson's sense when there is no longer a moral order to be continuous with. You cannot impose your own values in Nietzsche's sense when the space of the transcendent has already been filled — and vacated — by a faded advertisement.

The Invented Self and Its Discontents: Will, Authenticity, and the Limits of Construction

The Great Gatsby forces into the open a question that the competing intellectual traditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries each approached but none fully resolved: if a self is consciously made rather than discovered, can it be real? And if it cannot be real in the fullest sense, what exactly has been lost, and who bears the cost of that loss?

To appreciate why this question was so charged by 1925, it is necessary to understand what the Emersonian tradition had actually claimed, and how that claim had been received, distorted, and in certain respects betrayed by the culture that inherited it. Emerson had not simply said that individuals could improve themselves, or that ambition was a virtue, or that America offered unusual opportunities for advancement. He had said something philosophically more radical and more demanding: that the authentic self was not a social product at all, that it existed prior to and independent of the roles, relationships, and reputations that society assigned, and that the task of a genuine human life was to strip away those external accretions and live from the irreducible core of one's own being. The self-reliant individual, in Emerson's vision, was not someone who had successfully performed a role or accumulated the markers of success. He was someone who had ceased to need external validation entirely, who drew his sense of reality from within rather than from the mirror of other people's recognition.

By the early twentieth century, the popular American mythology of self-making that descended from Emerson had largely forgotten this demand. The language of self-creation had been absorbed into a culture of aspiration oriented almost entirely outward: toward wealth, toward status, toward the admiration of others. The Horatio Alger stories, the self-help literature, the rhetoric of the American Dream as it had crystallized by the 1920s — all of these retained Emerson's vocabulary of individual will and self-determination while quietly abandoning his insistence that the authentic

self was defined by its independence from external goods. What remained was the idea that a person could make himself into something new. What had been lost was the Emersonian caveat that the something new had to be genuinely one's own, answerable to no standard outside itself.

James Gatz's transformation into Jay Gatsby is the most vivid possible illustration of this gap between the Emersonian ideal and its popular corruption. Gatsby has performed an act of self-creation that is, in its sheer audacity and completeness, remarkable. He has invented a name, a history, a manner, a voice, a house, a wardrobe, and a social identity from nothing, sustaining the invention across years and in the face of considerable pressure. If will and imagination are the measures of authentic selfhood, then Gatsby would seem to have a strong claim. The Emersonian tradition, properly understood, must deny him that claim, because his entire construction is oriented not inward but outward — not merely outward in the general sense of seeking social recognition, but outward in the most specific and revealing sense: toward a single other person, toward Daisy Buchanan, and toward what Daisy represents in his imagination. Gatsby has not created himself in order to live more fully from his own inner resources. He has created himself as an instrument for recovering something he lost, or believes he lost, or perhaps never possessed except as a fantasy. His self is not self-reliant in any meaningful sense; it is entirely relational, entirely dependent on an external object for its coherence and its purpose.

The philosophical conflict the novel dramatizes can be stated directly. On one side stands the Emersonian position, which holds that authentic selfhood requires independence from external determination and that a self constructed in relation to another person's desire, or to a social image of success, is not a genuine self at all but a kind of elaborate performance, a costume rather than a character. On the other side stands a position that had been gaining philosophical force in the decades before 1925, associated most clearly with William James's pragmatist psychology and with certain strands of the emerging social thought of the period, which holds that the self is never a fixed inner substance waiting to be discovered but is always and necessarily a construction, always made in relation to an environment, to other people, and to the projects and commitments that give a life its shape. On this view, the question is not whether a self is constructed — all selves are constructed — but whether the construction is coherent, whether it is sustained with sufficient energy and conviction, and whether it enables the person to act effectively in the world.

James was not saying that the self was merely a fiction or that all performances were equally valid. He was saying that the self was a functional reality, that it was real insofar as it worked, insofar as it organized experience and enabled action, and that the question of its ultimate metaphysical status was less important than the question of its practical efficacy. This is a liberating idea in certain respects, and it had obvious affinities with the American tradition of self-making. But it also carries a troubling implication that James himself did not fully confront: if the self is real insofar as it works, what happens when it stops working? What happens when the external conditions that the constructed self depends on are withdrawn, when the object toward which the construction was oriented turns out to be unavailable or illusory?

Gatsby's tragedy, understood in these terms, is not simply the tragedy of a man who wanted too much or who was destroyed by the carelessness of the rich. It is the tragedy of a self whose coherence was entirely borrowed from an external source, and which therefore had no resources of its own when that source failed. The green light at the end of Daisy's dock is not merely a symbol of longing in the conventional sense. It is the organizing principle of a self that has no other organizing principle, and when the possibility of reaching it is finally, definitively foreclosed, there is nothing left. Gatsby does not simply lose Daisy. He loses the only thing that made him Gatsby rather than James Gatz, and the distinction between those two names is the distinction between a self that has been willed into existence and the raw material from which it was made.

The Double Scrutiny: Nick Carraway and the Narrated Self

The Great Gatsby does not simply dramatize the failure of the American Dream in the sociological sense of that phrase. It enacts a philosophical argument about the conditions under which self-creation can succeed or fail, and it does so by placing in opposition two incompatible understandings of what authentic selfhood requires. The Emersonian tradition demands that the authentic self be independent of external determination; the pragmatist tradition demands only that it be functionally coherent. Gatsby's self satisfies neither demand. It is not independent, because it is constituted entirely by its relation to Daisy and to the social world she represents. It is not functionally coherent in the pragmatist sense, because its coherence is entirely contingent on the availability of an external object that cannot be secured. The novel's argument is that these two failures are not accidental but necessary: that a self constructed the way Gatsby constructs his is structurally incapable of satisfying either criterion, and that this structural incapacity is what the novel means by the word illusion.

But the argument does not rest with Gatsby alone, and this is where the novel's philosophical depth becomes most apparent. Nick Carraway is not a neutral observer of Gatsby's experiment in self-creation. He is himself engaged in a quieter, less dramatic, but philosophically no less significant version of the same project. Nick has come East from the Midwest with his own aspirations, his own carefully managed self-presentation, his own investment in a particular image of himself as a man of honesty and clear judgment. His narration is not a transparent window onto events but a retrospective construction, shaped by his need to make sense of what he witnessed in a way that reflects well on his own perceptions and values. The famous opening declaration — that he is one of the few honest people he has ever known — is not a statement of fact but a performance, and it is a performance that the novel quietly but persistently undermines. Nick's reliability as a narrator is not simply a technical question about point of view. It is a philosophical question about whether any act of self-narration can escape the distortions that self-interest and self-protection introduce.

Nick operates simultaneously as Fitzgerald's formal instrument — the voice through which Gatsby becomes visible — and as a character subject to the same pressures the novel analyses. The novel's scrutiny of self-creation is therefore doubled. Gatsby's fabricated identity is examined from the outside, through Nick's narration. Nick's narration is itself a fabricated identity, examined from the inside, through the gaps and evasions and moments of unacknowledged feeling that accumulate across the text. The novel does not offer a stable vantage point from which Gatsby's illusions can be judged, because the vantage point is itself illusory. In this doubling — this refusal of any position outside the problem of self-construction — the novel's deepest philosophical claim is located: that the question of authentic selfhood cannot be resolved from within the terms that the competing traditions of the period had made available, because those terms are themselves part of the problem.

The Voice Full of Money: Daisy Buchanan and the Identity That Requires No Construction

The observation that settles *The Great Gatsby*'s deepest argument is delivered not by Gatsby but by Nick, and it concerns not a choice Daisy makes but the quality of her voice: "Her voice is full of money." Gatsby recognizes the diagnosis immediately — "That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money — that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it... High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl..." — but the recognition does not help him, because what it identifies is not a seduction but a metaphysical condition, and metaphysical conditions cannot be adjusted by acts of will or imitation.

To say that a voice is full of money is not to say that its owner talks about money, or values money, or even has money. It is to say that money has become so thoroughly constitutive of her mode of existence that it speaks through her without her intending it. Daisy does not perform wealth; she is wealth, in the sense that the social order of inherited privilege has organized her at a level below deliberation — in her voice, in her manner, in the kind of attention she bestows and the kind she withdraws. This is what Emerson's demand for authentic selfhood was always implicitly opposed to: not poverty, but the complete constitution of a person by her social position. The Emersonian authentic self was one that had managed to resist such constitution, to live from an inner resource that remained genuinely its own. Daisy represents the limit case in which such resistance is not only absent but unnecessary: she is so fully what her position has made her that the question of an inner self independent of social determination does not arise. Her identity requires no construction because it was built before she was born.

This structural inversion sits at the center of the novel. Gatsby represents the voluntarist extreme: a self made entirely through acts of will, constituted by effort, aimed at an external object. Daisy represents the hereditary extreme: a self constituted entirely by inheritance, requiring no effort, aimed at nothing beyond its own continuation. The novel does not simply show Gatsby's

self-creation failing. It shows it failing *against* something — against a form of identity whose legitimacy derives from its immunity to the kind of effort Gatsby expends. Old money, in the world of the novel, is not simply money that has been around for a long time. It is money that has been transmuted into character — into voice, manner, ease, carelessness — in such a way that the transmutation is no longer visible. What Tom and Daisy have, and what Gatsby can never purchase, is the appearance of necessity: the appearance that they are what they are not because they chose it or constructed it but because they simply are it, as inevitably as the geography of East Egg is what it is.

Daisy's famous carelessness — "they were careless people, Tom and Daisy — they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness" — is the specific cognitive and ethical structure of inherited privilege: the ability to be careless because one's identity is not at stake in one's actions, because no single mistake can undo what was given before one could make mistakes. Gatsby cannot be careless. Every party, every shirt, every gesture matters, because his entire existence is constituted by those gestures; without them, he is James Gatz again, with nothing. Daisy can be careless because her existence is not constituted by its surface. She is underwritten in a way that Gatsby is not, and that underwriting is what his entire project is aimed at acquiring — except that it cannot be acquired, because its defining characteristic is that it was not acquired.

The Crystallization of Desire: Stendhal and the Structure of Romantic Idealization

Gatsby's immediate recognition that Nick's diagnosis is true — that Daisy's voice is full of money, that the inexhaustible charm is exactly that — is one of the novel's most disquieting moments. He sees it. He understands what Nick is saying. And the understanding changes nothing. This is the structure of desire itself, not a failure of intelligence or self-awareness, and it was described with unusual precision by Stendhal in *De l'Amour* in 1822, a century before Fitzgerald wrote.

Stendhal's account of what he called *cristallisation* provides the missing philosophical link between the novel's diagnosis of Gatsby's particular error and the wider argument about retrospective idealization. Love, Stendhal argued, is not the perception of qualities that the beloved actually possesses. It is a mental operation by which the lover projects ideal qualities onto a person who serves as their occasion. The image he uses is precise: a bare twig left in the salt mines of Salzburg for several months emerges encrusted with crystals, transformed into something glittering and precious. The twig is still there; the crystals are the lover's own contribution. What the lover sees when he looks at the beloved is not the beloved but the crystallization — and the crystallization is real as an experience even though it corresponds to no actual quality of its object.

Correct perception does not dissolve crystallization because crystallization is not a cognitive error. It is not a mistake about the facts. Gatsby knows perfectly well that the Daisy he is reaching for is

not quite the Daisy across the water — that the colossal significance he has invested her with exceeds anything she could deliver. He knows this with one part of his mind even as he reaches. The crystal is his; it is made of his own desire; and its dissolution would not reveal a more accurate perception of Daisy. It would reveal nothing — the absence of the object that organized his existence. Which is exactly what happens. When Daisy is finally present, the crystals fall off — the will has nowhere to go once its object is secured.

Stendhal's framework connects Gatsby's particular failure to the universal structure of romantic desire, and that connection matters for the novel's wider argument. The political version of retrospective idealization — the investment of a lost national past with perfections it did not fully possess — borrows its energy from the same mental operation that produces romantic love. The beloved country, like the beloved person, is the occasion for a crystallization that exceeds it. The "again" in the political slogan has the same structure as the "again" in Gatsby's demand that the past be repeated: both are expressions of a desire whose object is not the historical reality but the crystal that has been grown over it. Both are equally immune to the discovery that the object was never quite what the crystal made it appear to be.

The Naturalist in the Drawing Room: Tom Buchanan and the Bad Faith of Biological Determinism

Tom Buchanan is the only figure in *The Great Gatsby* who has a philosophy, and he states it directly. "Have you read 'The Rise of the Colored Empires' by this man Goddard?" he asks at dinner on the occasion of Nick's first visit to East Egg. "It's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be — will be utterly submerged... It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved." The book is a thinly disguised version of Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920), one of the most widely read works of scientific racism in early-twentieth-century America, whose argument is exactly what Tom summarizes: that the social hierarchy of races is a biological fact, that the dominance of certain peoples is the expression of natural superiority, and that this arrangement is not history but nature. Tom's racial theory is an application of the naturalist tradition to social organization. Human beings, on this view, are what their biology makes them; the social order reflects the natural order; and the natural order is not subject to revision by acts of aspiration or self-creation.

This is a coherent philosophical position, and it stands in direct opposition to everything the Emersonian tradition had claimed. Where Emerson argued that the self was not fixed by origin or circumstance, that identity was something made rather than received, Tom argues the opposite: that what a person is, is determined before he acts, and that the social hierarchy that results from this determination is legitimate because it is natural. On Tom's account, Gatsby's attempt at self-creation is not simply misguided but biologically illegitimate — the claim of an inferior type to occupy the position of a superior one, a confusion of categories that the natural order will

eventually correct. The novel, in its plot, appears to confirm this: Gatsby is destroyed, Tom and Daisy retreat into their money. The natural hierarchy reasserts itself.

What the novel adds, with a precision that Tom himself cannot see, is the scene in the apartment in New York in Chapter Two, where Tom strikes Myrtle Wilson "with his open hand" for repeating Daisy's name. Tom does not decide to hit Myrtle. His body acts. The blow is not a choice but a reflex, the response of an organism to a stimulus that has exceeded the threshold of its tolerance. In the strictest naturalist sense, this is exactly what the naturalist tradition would predict: a creature driven by forces it did not choose and cannot fully master, responding to provocation with physical force because physical force is what its nature, in that moment, produces.

Tom's bad faith is not personal hypocrisy — it is structural. Tom deploys naturalism as a social theory — as an account of why certain races and classes occupy the positions they occupy, and why that arrangement is legitimate. Naturalism as a philosophical framework is indifferent to social hierarchy; it describes forces that operate below the level of class distinction and do not stop at the boundary of East Egg. Tom treats naturalism as a theory about other people — about the races and classes positioned below his own — while experiencing it from the inside as an animal fact about himself. His body acts before his will is engaged. The Fitzgerald who renders Tom's physical bulk with such care — "a body capable of enormous leverage," "a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat" — is the same Fitzgerald who has absorbed the naturalist tradition's way of showing a person as a creature of appetite and reflex even while that person is claiming to be something categorically superior to appetite and reflex.

Tom's body, in that apartment, instantiates the very theory his mind deploys against others — the bad faith the novel exposes, structural rather than personal. The old-money aristocracy that Tom represents organized itself around the claim that its social dominance was biologically legitimate, that the distance between East Egg and the Valley of Ashes was a fact of nature rather than a fact of history. Tom's racial theory is the explicit articulation of what the social geography of the novel implies. What Fitzgerald adds, through the scene in the apartment, is the evidence that the philosophy is held without self-knowledge — that the man who most believes in the determining power of nature is himself the figure whose nature the novel most fully, and most remorselessly, determines.

The Will Against Itself: Nietzsche, Self-Overcoming, and the Failure of Creative Power

The Emersonian and pragmatist traditions each offer a criterion by which Gatsby's self-creation can be measured and found wanting. A third framework — one whose vocabulary of will, power, creation, and transvaluation seems almost designed to describe what Gatsby attempts — presses the analysis further. Nietzsche's influence on the intellectual atmosphere of the nineteen-twenties was largely indirect, a matter of cultural permission rather than close reading; but the philosophical structure he articulated serves as a sharp critical instrument regardless of whether Fitzgerald engaged it directly. Nietzsche had argued, against the entire weight of Western moral philosophy, that the self is not discovered but made, that values are not found in the world but imposed upon it by acts of creative will, and that the highest human achievement is not conformity to any external standard but the continuous process he called self-overcoming: the capacity to surpass oneself, to break the forms one has already created and create again. Where Emerson demands independence and pragmatism demands functional coherence, Nietzsche demands something more radical still — a will that is its own justification, a creativity that needs no object outside itself to validate it.

Gatsby has done everything Nietzsche's framework demands of the self-creating will. He has rejected the given world of his origins with a completeness that would have satisfied the most demanding critic of inherited values. He has invented a name, a history, a manner, a house, a wardrobe, a voice — the famous voice that Nick tells us is full of money, which is to say full of the world's agreement that he is what he claims to be. He has willed himself into existence against every material obstacle. The Nietzschean framework therefore reveals something that the Emersonian and pragmatist critiques cannot reach: Gatsby's failure is not a failure of independence or coherence but a failure of direction. His will is not directed outward toward the creation of new values; it is directed backward toward the recovery of something he believes he once possessed. He is not a creator. He is a worshipper.

Nietzsche's concept of self-overcoming is inseparable from the idea of forward movement, of the self as a process that consumes its own past forms in the act of generating new ones. The Nietzschean creator does not return; he does not repeat; he does not wait at the end of a dock for a green light to come closer. What Gatsby does — what the novel renders with such devastating clarity — is the exact opposite of self-overcoming. He overcomes nothing. He freezes time, or tries to, insisting in that extraordinary exchange with Nick that of course you can repeat the past. The green light at the end of Daisy's dock is not a symbol of future creation but of arrested desire, of a will that has turned itself into a monument to its own object. Nietzsche had a name for this condition too: he called it the spirit of revenge, the will's rebellion against time and its refusal to say of the past, *thus I willed it*. Gatsby cannot say this. He can only say: thus it was, and thus it must be again. His entire existence is an act of revenge against the fact that time has moved and Daisy has married someone else.

This is why the parties matter philosophically, and not merely as social spectacle. Gatsby fills his house with strangers he does not know and does not care about, orchestrating an atmosphere of abundance and possibility that is entirely instrumental — designed not to express anything about himself but to attract the attention of one woman across the water. The creative energy that Nietzsche would have recognized as self-expressive is here entirely in the service of an external object. The will that should be its own end has made itself a means. A will that has made itself a means is, in Nietzsche's terms, no longer a will at all — it is a mechanism, a function, a thing driven rather than driving. Gatsby's famous capacity for hope, which Nick identifies as one of his most remarkable qualities, is not the forward-looking hope of the creator but the backward-looking hope of the devotee: hope that the world will return to a configuration it once briefly held, hope that a person will become again what she was, or what he imagined she was, five years ago.

The novel is precise about this. When Gatsby and Daisy are finally reunited, the moment does not fulfill the dream — it diminishes it. Nick observes that the colossal significance of the green light had vanished forever, that the count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. This is not merely the familiar disappointment of achieved desire. It is the structural consequence of a will that has defined itself entirely by its object: when the object is present, the will has nowhere to go. It cannot expand, cannot create, cannot overcome. It can only hold on, and holding on is exactly what Daisy — careless, beautiful, and finally indifferent — will not permit. Gatsby's will destroys itself by succeeding, which is the clearest possible demonstration that it was never genuinely creative in the Nietzschean sense.

The Backward-Looking Green Light: Desire, Time, and the Impossible Return

"Can't repeat the past?" Gatsby asks Nick, baffled. "Why of course you can!" The exchange is often read as the novel's central irony — the naive romantic who doesn't understand that time moves in one direction. But it is more specific than that. Gatsby does not want to repeat the past in the abstract; he wants to recover a particular moment of possibility, the afternoon on Daisy's porch in Louisville when everything still seemed open. What he is reaching for across the bay is not a future that resembles that past. It is that past itself.

This retroactive orientation pervades the symbolism. The green light is Daisy's dock light — not a symbol of the future in general but the light visible from a specific house that holds a specific person who represents a specific moment Gatsby needs to undo the intervening years to return to. Nick observes near the end: Gatsby "had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night." It was already behind him from the start.

Nick's closing paragraph makes the temporal structure of the novel's argument explicit, and widens it from Gatsby to America: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into

the past." The image is of effort directed forward that is, by the nature of the medium, constantly undone. The green light is described earlier as the "orgastic future that year by year recedes before us" — Fitzgerald's coinage, suggesting both the climactic and the orgiastic, the quality of a release that is always imminent and never arrived — but then Nick reveals that this future was always the past in disguise. "It eluded us then, but that's no matter — tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther..." The faith in tomorrow is revealed as a mechanism for perpetually deferring the recognition that the desired object no longer exists and never existed in quite the form it was imagined.

Fitzgerald's most damaging argument follows: not that the American Dream fails because the world is unjust, or because human beings are too weak, or because capitalism distorts the self. It fails because its structure is constitutively retrospective. The object of American desire is an idealized past that is experienced as a lost future — a confusion of temporal direction that makes the dream permanently renewable (the green light never goes out) and permanently impossible (it was always already behind you).

The Wartime Romance: Why That Afternoon and Not Another

The temporal argument establishes the direction of Gatsby's desire; it does not yet explain why that specific afternoon, that specific woman, that specific moment carries the weight it does. The Louisville afternoon in 1917 that organizes Gatsby's entire existence is not simply a past moment that he has chosen to idealize. It is a wartime moment — and wartime, as a lived condition with a specific structure of attention and urgency, inflates the value of the experiences that occur within it in ways that cannot be reconstructed once the war is over.

Gatsby met Daisy when he was a young officer about to be shipped to France. The world he inhabited in that Louisville autumn was structured by the proximity of death, the compression of the future, the sense that what was happening now might be the last of anything. Under these conditions, an ordinary experience — an afternoon on a girl's porch, a voice, a feeling of possibility — acquires an intensity it cannot possess in ordinary time. The stakes are high not because of anything Daisy is or does, but because the context has raised the stakes of everything. Wartime inflates the significance of what falls within it, not through exaggeration but through the heightening of attention that comes when the future is no longer guaranteed.

What Gatsby is actually trying to recover when he reaches for the green light is not simply Daisy, not simply that afternoon, but the world in which that afternoon was possible — a world where the proximity of death made ordinary moments extraordinary, where class barriers were temporarily suspended by the democratic emergency of conscription, where a boy from North Dakota could stand on equal ground with old Louisville money because they were both wearing the same uniform and headed to the same trenches. The Louisville of 1917 was one of the few contexts in which the distance between James Gatz and Daisy Fay could plausibly collapse. The prosperity of

1922 cannot reconstruct that context, because no amount of yellow cars and white flannel suits can manufacture the conditions — danger, urgency, the democratic levelling of emergency — that gave the original moment its charge.

Nick understands something of this, though he does not state it directly. His narration registers the wartime quality of Gatsby's obsession in the way it renders Gatsby's memory: not as a pleasant recollection but as something almost religious, a moment of absolute presence that has organized everything since. What Gatsby lost in 1917 was not a girl. It was the only set of conditions under which the self he was constructing could be believed — by himself and by others — to be real. The peacetime version of that self, however elaborately maintained, is always haunted by the knowledge that the conditions that made it credible no longer exist. The green light is green because it was there before the light changed.

The Narrator's Wager: Writing as the Only Surviving Form of Self-Creation

After Gatsby's three failures — Emersonian, pragmatist, Nietzschean — what remains is Nick Carraway, sitting down to write. This is the novel's final philosophical move, and a more complicated one than it first appears. Nick is not a neutral recorder. His narration is shaped by self-interest, by the need to construct a version of events that reflects well on his own judgment and sensibility, by an attraction to Gatsby that he can acknowledge only obliquely. His famous claim to honesty — one of the few honest people he has ever known, he says of himself, with a complacency that the novel quietly undermines — is itself a piece of self-construction, a rhetorical act designed to secure the reader's trust and, more importantly, Nick's own.

But something in Nick's act of writing survives the novel's undermining of it, and understanding what requires distinguishing between two kinds of self-construction. Gatsby's self-construction is oriented entirely toward an external object and measured entirely by whether that object can be secured. Nick's self-construction, in the act of narration, is oriented toward the making of meaning from experience — toward the imposition of form on events that, as he lived them, had no form. This is closer to what Nietzsche meant by the creative will, and it is also closer to what the pragmatists meant by functional coherence, because a narrative that makes sense of experience is exactly a construction whose value is measured by what it enables: understanding, orientation, the capacity to go on. Nick's writing does not recover the past; it transforms it into something that can be possessed, which is the only form of possession the novel finally allows.

The novel qualifies even this. Nick's narrative is full of gaps, contradictions, moments where his account of events cannot be squared with his claimed position as observer. He reports conversations he did not witness, attributes motives he cannot have known, constructs a Gatsby who is partly his own creation — the romantic hero that Nick needs Gatsby to be in order for the story to mean what Nick needs it to mean. The novel is aware of this. Exposing Nick's unreliability is not a dismissal of his narrative but a suggestion that all narrative is unreliable in just this way,

that the self-construction achieved through storytelling is always partial, always interested, always shaped by needs that the storyteller cannot fully see. Nick's writing is the only form of self-creation the novel endorses, but it endorses it with open eyes, knowing that what Nick creates is not the truth about Gatsby but a truth about the relationship between Gatsby's failure and Nick's own need to understand it.

The Opacity of the Performed Self: What Nick Cannot Know

A formal fact about *The Great Gatsby* that criticism has not always recognized as a philosophical argument: the novel is narrated entirely by someone who is never given access to the protagonist's interior. Everything Nick knows about Gatsby he knows from the outside — from Gatsby's performance, from what others say, from inference and surmise. When Nick speculates about what Gatsby felt in his final moments, he is explicit that he is speculating. The opacity is not an oversight or a limitation of first-person narration. It is the novel's most consequential formal claim about what the performed self ultimately is.

A self consciously constructed for an external audience has, as its defining characteristic, an outside that is managed and controlled. Gatsby curates every visible surface — the shirts, the parties, the car, the accent, the mysterious past, the name itself (born James Gatz). What lies inside this performance is, by definition, what the performance was designed to conceal. Fitzgerald takes this one step further: he implies that there may not be a stable interior behind the performance that differs in kind from the performance itself. The self that Gatsby has made is not a disguise over a real James Gatz. James Gatz is not there to be uncovered — the construction was the whole story.

This is why Nick cannot know Gatsby, and why the novel never grants the reader the access that would resolve the uncertainty. To enter Gatsby's consciousness and find a stable, coherent interiority behind the performance would be to suggest that the constructed self is a mask over a real self — that authenticity is being suppressed, waiting to be released. Fitzgerald refuses this consolation. The performance goes all the way down. What is behind Gatsby's green light is more green light.

Nick's unreliability, established in his narration, is here given its deepest explanation: not merely self-interest but structural impossibility. He cannot write the truth about Gatsby because there is no privileged inner truth to access. The novel he writes is, like Gatsby's parties, a performance organized around an absence.

The Philosophical Moment of 1925: What the Novel Knows That the Traditions Do Not

Gatsby has absorbed all the available languages of self-making — the Franklinian language of self-improvement, the Emersonian language of self-reliance, the Nietzschean language of will and power — and used them to construct a self that is, in the deepest sense, borrowed. He has taken the forms without the substance, the vocabulary without the philosophy, the gesture of self-creation without the inward freedom that would make it real. The novel's argument is that this is not Gatsby's personal failure but the structural condition of his moment: the traditions that promised self-creation have been hollowed out by the very social and economic forces that made their vocabulary so attractive, so that what remains is the promise without the possibility, the dream without the ground.

What Fitzgerald contributes that the philosophical traditions of the period could not is precisely this: a form of knowing that is available to narrative but not to argument. Philosophy can identify the criteria for authentic selfhood; it can show where a given attempt at self-creation fails to meet them. What it cannot do is render the experience of that failure from the inside, cannot show how the failure feels like success until the moment it collapses, cannot capture the quality of Gatsby's hope — its genuine beauty, its genuine pathos — while simultaneously demonstrating its structural impossibility. The novel does all of this at once, holding the philosophical critique and the human sympathy in a single sustained act of attention. Nick's final image — boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past — is a condition, not a conclusion: the condition of a self that cannot create forward because it does not know how to let go of what it imagines it once was. The novel does not resolve this condition. It inhabits it, with a precision and a sorrow that no philosophical argument of 1925 could match, and leaves the reader not with an answer but with the full weight of the question.

The Green Light as Political Theology: Retrospective Idealization and the American Imaginary

The Great Gatsby ends with an image that Fitzgerald intends as the novel's final argument, and that argument is not primarily about Jay Gatsby. It is about America. "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." The "we" is not Gatsby and Nick. It is everyone who has been formed by the culture the novel anatomizes. The closing argument is not that the American Dream is unachievable. It is that the dream, as structured, is not directed toward the future at all, whatever its rhetoric. Directed toward an idealized past that is experienced as a lost future, its motive force is not hope but longing.

The distinction between idealization and idealism is crucial for understanding what the novel diagnoses. Gatsby is not an idealist. He does not believe in principles of justice or virtue that have never been enacted. He believes in a specific afternoon in Louisville. The green light shines across

the bay because Daisy is on the other side of it — not because it illuminates a principle. The energy that drives the novel is the energy of retrospective idealization: the mental operation by which a past experience or state is invested, in memory, with a perfection it never actually had, and then mourned as a lost paradise that must be recovered.

What the novel sees with unusual clarity is that this structure of retrospective idealization is not idiosyncratic to Gatsby. It is the dominant mode of American political desire. The founding mythology of the republic — the lost Eden of the colonies, the interrupted promise of Reconstruction, the remembered prosperity of an earlier decade — has consistently organized itself around the figure of a greatness that preceded the present moment and must be recovered rather than constructed. "Make America Great Again" is the most explicit recent formulation of what Fitzgerald was already diagnosing in 1925 — not because of its specific politics, which are not Fitzgerald's concern, but because of its temporal structure. The "again" is the tell. It locates the ideal in the past, makes the present a fall from that past, and directs political energy toward recovery rather than construction. The green light never goes out; it simply migrates from one object to another.

The further precision Fitzgerald adds — and this is what elevates the novel from social commentary to philosophical argument — is that the past being idealized was never quite what it is remembered as being. Daisy was never the Daisy Gatsby needed her to be, even in Louisville in 1917. The ideal is not a real past that has been lost; it is a construction placed over a past that was already imperfect, already partial, already real. Recovery is therefore structurally impossible: you cannot return to something that never existed in the form you are imagining. The boats beat against the current forever because the shore they are trying to reach was never there.

The novel does not say that the American Dream is a lie. It says that the dream is a structural operation of desire that cannot deliver what it promises — not because people are corrupt or the system is unjust, but because the promised object, the idealized past recovered, cannot exist as promised. The green light was always already the wrong light, in the wrong direction, on the wrong shore.

The Green Light Goes Global: Retrospective Idealization Beyond America

The structure Fitzgerald identified as distinctively American has turned out to be a general feature of political desire at a specific moment of historical pressure. The "again" in "Make America Great Again" has its equivalents in nearly every political context where modernity, globalization, or demographic change has generated the sense that something was lost that must be recovered. The tendency itself — to locate the ideal in the past, to invest that past with a perfection it never fully had, to direct political energy toward recovery rather than construction — appears with remarkable consistency across contexts that share almost nothing else.

Russia's political project under Vladimir Putin is perhaps the most explicit international instance. Putin's ideology of the "Russian World" — the claim that Russia has a civilizational destiny rooted in Orthodox heritage, and that the Soviet collapse was "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century" — is constitutively retrospective. The object of idealization shifts: sometimes the Tsarist empire, sometimes the Soviet superpower at its height, sometimes a medieval Kievan Rus — the East Slavic federation centred on Kyiv, claimed by both Russian and Ukrainian national narratives — whose boundaries conveniently include present-day Ukraine. What remains constant is the temporal structure: a greatness that was possessed and lost, a present that is a fall from that greatness, a political will directed entirely toward recovery. The annexation of Crimea was framed — and experienced by its supporters — not as conquest but as return, as the recovery of something that had always been Russia's, temporarily mislaid by the chaos of 1991. The green light, in the Russian case, shines somewhere to the west, across the Black Sea.

The European far right has organized itself around the same structure with remarkable consistency across very different national contexts. In France, the National Rally's implicit promise is a France before immigration, before demographic transformation, before the dilution of a culture vaguely located in the Catholic, ethnically homogeneous villages of some earlier century. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán has built an entire political philosophy around the trauma of Trianon — the 1920 treaty that stripped Hungary of two-thirds of its territory — and the project of recovering a specifically Christian national identity against the contaminations of liberal cosmopolitanism. In Italy, the "roots" rhetoric of Fratelli d'Italia — Giorgia Meloni's governing party, whose name derives from the opening words of the national anthem and whose lineage traces to post-fascist Italian nationalism — locates the ideal in a Roman and Christian civilization that preceded the corruptions of globalism. In Britain, the Brexit campaign was sustained almost entirely by retrospective idealization: a sovereignty allegedly lost, a global role allegedly diminished, an authentic national selfhood allegedly suppressed by Brussels bureaucracy. In each case the idealized past is differently specified; the operation is identical.

The precision Fitzgerald adds — the precision that politics, by its nature, cannot make explicit — is that the idealized past was never quite what it is being remembered as being. The France being mourned never existed as a culturally homogeneous entity: France has been a nation of internal migrations, regional linguistic diversity, and successive waves of immigration since the Middle Ages. The Russian greatness being recovered was itself built on conquest and the internal repression of the very populations now being claimed as historically Russian. The British sovereignty mourned in the Brexit campaign was never as absolute as imagined, and the post-Brexit period has turned out to feel remarkably unlike the recovered paradise that was promised. In every case, the green light was always already the wrong light, on the wrong shore, at the wrong distance.

What makes *The Great Gatsby* something more than a period artifact, more than a document of the nineteen-twenties, is this: its diagnosis of retrospective idealization has proven more durable than

its period setting. Fitzgerald wrote a novel about a specific man, a specific summer, a specific cultural moment. He also wrote a novel about the structure of desire itself — the way the self reaches backward for an object that was never quite what it was imagined to be, and calls that backward reaching hope. A century on, the boats are still beating against the current. The shore they are trying to reach was never there.

MAGA, Putin, and the Seduction of the Past: A Philosophical Essay on The Great Gatsby is an independent scholarly essay by Daniel Shilansky.

This essay is also published as the critical introduction to the Heritage Canon philosophical edition of *The Great Gatsby*, available on Amazon. Heritage Canon publishes Daniel Shilansky's complete series of philosophical editions of classic literature — the full catalogue is at heritagecanon.com.